



# Congregation Etz Chaim

*Community, Spirituality, and You*

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## SHIVA

When faced with the loss of a loved one, we often feel alone. In the Jewish faith, this loss is placed in the context of family and community. While practices may vary, every law and custom related to Jewish mourning addresses the belief that we are not alone.

Immediately following the burial, the mourners return to the “Shiva House”. Shiva comes from the Hebrew word shi’vah – seven. Traditional Jews will “sit Shiva” for seven days. In the Reform movement this is often abbreviated to three days. The days of Shiva are reduced if the major holidays of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, Shavout or Sukkot occur during the seven days.

The period of Shiva is a time to focus on the mourners. Close friends and non-mourning family members help prepare the home for the mourners, creating an atmosphere of love, caring and kindness to help soften the pain.

The laws of mourning cause the mourners to focus on their own spirituality. De-emphasizing their own physicality by not pampering their bodies, they are reminded that what is missed at this time is not the physical person who is gone, but the essence of who that person was. It is customary to cover mirrors in the Shiva house. Although there are several reasons given for this, the most cogent one is that the mirror is a symbol of vanity and not appropriate in the house of mourning. For the same reason, male mourners often do not shave during Shiva, and pleasurable activities such as listening to music are limited.

Upon returning from the cemetery and prior to entering the Shiva house, it is customary to perform a ceremonial washing of hands. When one has come in contact with death, traditionally a Jew will pour water three times over each hand, alternating hands each time in order to focus on life. Water is considered the source of all life, and we pour it over our hands as a physical act that has spiritual ramifications.

In the Shiva home the immediate mourners might be wearing a black ribbon. The ribbon symbolizes the torn heart.

Immediately upon entering the home, a memorial candle is lit and remains burning publicly 24 hours per day throughout the entire week. There is no blessing for lighting this candle. The candle serves as a reminder that the deceased’s soul is eternal.

Friends and neighbors prepare a meal of condolence so that after returning from the cemetery the mourners can be fed. At a time of grief one does not normally think about food so it considered an act of kindness to feed them. The meal includes bread, the sustenance of life and hard-boiled eggs – a food that is round like the cycle of life. Because mourners are to refrain from working, friends serve the meal. It is customary for all meals during the Shiva period to be prepared and served by the community.

When one pays a Shiva call, the focus is on comforting the mourners in their time of greatest grief. Traditionally, one enters the Shiva house quietly. It is customary to not ring the doorbell. No one should greet visitors; they simply enter on their own. Mourners customarily do not rise to greet or entertain visitors. Often visitors will bring a food offering such as cake, fruits or nuts. Friends lay these out for visitors because mourners are not hosts. In lieu of a food gift, contributions to a specific charity designated by the family are appropriate. Jewish tradition frowns on cut flowers at a funeral or Shiva house because they will wither and die.



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Take your cue from the mourners. If they feel like speaking, let them indicate it to you by speaking first. Let them lead and talk about what they want to talk about. It is best to speak about the one who has passed away, and if you have any stories or memories to share with the mourner, this is the time to do so. This is not a time to distract the bereaved from mourning. Often, the best thing to say is nothing. A Shiva call can sometimes be completely silent. If the mourners do not feel like talking at that time, so be it. Your goal is not to get them to talk; it is to comfort them. Throughout your visit to the Shiva house you should avoid actions, such as loud laughter, that are not in keeping with the mood.

According to Jewish tradition, ten Jewish people over the age of 13 must be present to have a minyan in order to hold a prayer service. A service takes place at home because (traditionally) mourners do not leave the home during the Shiva period and would otherwise not have the opportunity to recite the Mourner's Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. On Shabbat rather than holding a service in their home, the mourners join the community at the synagogue for services.

Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day (or sooner depending on circumstances). It is traditional for mourners to take a short walk together. This walk symbolizes the beginning of the return to everyday life. Judaic practice shows mourners the way to mourn, grieve, recover and remember.

This pamphlet was designed for those who are unfamiliar with the Jewish practices that surround death of an immediate family member and the days following the burial. We at Congregation Etz Chaim hope the information helps you to become comfortable with our traditions.

If you find that you still have questions about our practices, please feel free to call the synagogue office to make an appointment with either of our rabbis.

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